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ABSTRACT

When the composition program at Kansas State University (Manhattan) was radically reoriented from one that emphasized the writing product to one that stressed the writing process, a number of problems surfaced. Teachers, for example, had difficulty in adjusting from being purveyors of rules and forms to being facilitators whose job was to help students create a piece of writing. Many also found it difficult to shift from the traditional ways of evaluating and grading student themes to the more individualized methods required in a process-oriented classroom. Students, too, experienced problems with the transition. Most had come to the composition program with preconceived ideas--formed by their high school experiences--of what a writing course should be. Accustomed to being told to write a "classification," or a "persuasive" paper, they felt discomfort when they were not given rules and forms for their writing. They also had a difficult time in overcoming their fear of error and in accepting the idea that making errors can be part of the process of learning to write. After a year, however, both teachers and students have come to accept the program change and to appreciate the value of the new approach to writing instruction. (FL)

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The Transition to a Process Approach to Writing Instruction

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The Transition to a Process Approach to Writing Instruction

Last year the composition program at Kansas State University was radically reoriented from one which emphasized the writing product to one more concerned with writing as process. An attempt was made to implement some of the recent research done on the composing process, to adopt a more flexible workshop approach in the classroom. I would like today to describe some of the problems which resulted from our program changes and give a few reasons for them. Our experiences might serve to enlighten, console, and prepare others for the problems attendant on effecting radical change in traditional composition programs.

But first a word about antecedents. For the five or six years preceding our change to process, our initial composition course had been a highly structured one using as its frame a text with the subtitle "Six Basic Steps" and with a prefatory promise to instructors that the formula delineated in the following pages was "sure-fire in its results." Benignly dictatorial, the text bullied students into following one step after another in order to arrive at "automatic success" in writing. Beginning with "a short, simple declarative sentence that makes one statement," the student was then to write "three sentences about the sentence in Step 1." Predictably, the next step was to write 4 or 5 sentences about each of the sentences in Step 2. Step 4 involved the addition of details; Steps 5 and 6, the insertion of paragraph and sentence transitions. Voilá: the 5 paragraph theme!

In thus reducing the writing process to a series of simple, lockstep directives, the students received a false impression of what writing was all about. Worse, they came to see this as mere "themewriting," a form

perceived as "dysfunctional" in all but composition classes. Thus they sailed forth with their As, Bs, occasionally Cs--for they could write these papers--only to be sunk in other courses which demanded that they adopt writing form to a variety of subjects about which they needed to say considerably more than could be crammed into a 500 word theme!

Now I do not wish to imply that our previous program was exceptional in any way other than the structural rigidity of its pedagogical approach. Actually it was typical of most traditional composition programs in its aims--and perhaps more efficient than most in accomplishing them. It, like many traditional programs, prescribed the 5 paragraph theme with all its accoutrements of thesis statement, topic sentences, details, and transitions and led students to believe that writing invariably takes this form in spite of the fact that most of the essays the students were reading in their anthologies were variously structured and developed. However, to acknowledge the diversity of form and structure in these essays was to muddy the clarity of the traditional course, which for a long time no one seemed willing to do. After all, students knew what was expected of them--and played the game. Teachers also knew what was expected of them--and went calmly through the motions of teaching writing--complaining only of the deadening burden of reading what they themselves had prepared their students to write.

Increasing criticism of the writing products resulting from this assembly-line approach eventually prompted the formation of a committee of seven representing all departmental ranks to come up with a program which reflected recent research in the composing process. Very narrowly emerging from this committee was an approach and a text which provides an "uncommonly thorough account of the meditative, exploratory, and investigative processes that precede and accompany the actual process of writing." In addition, the text provides real alternatives for organizing

and designing a paper. The emphasis in the text is on opening up for the student "the exciting possibilities of language and writing" in order to provide students with options and choices at every stage in the writing process. The eventual products of this approach were often a far cry indeed from the formulaic 500 word theme.

That our transition year had jagged edges is perhaps understandable. In the first place (and most obviously), the passing of any system of widely held pedagogical views and methods is bound to cause bafflement and confusion, especially if that system has underlain not only the teaching approaches of experienced teachers but also the educational strategies by which those teachers were themselves taught. In the second place, the size of our composition program and the makeup of its composition faculty made the adjustment more difficult yet. Kansas State University has a six-hour composition requirement for all freshmen. About 130 sections of composition are offered each semester with a total enrollment of approximately 3,000 students. The classes are large, enrolling up to 28 students per section. The staff of 60, ranging in degree of experience from considerable to none at all, is drawn from graduate teaching assistants and full and part time instructors, with some sections being staffed from the professorial ranks. These instructors are guided by a departmental syllabus, but otherwise have complete autonomy in their classrooms. The size of the classes and the relative inexperience of many of the instructors obviously contributed to some of the transitional difficulties arising from the switch from a dogmatic, often rigid traditional composition pedagogy to a more flexible, process-oriented approach.

The size of our composition program and the makeup of our composition faculty make, I would imagine, our program a fairly typical one for state universities. If this is so, Kansas State's experience in changing from

what Richard Young calls the "current-traditional composition paradigm" to a paradigm emphasizing the composing process would be fairly representative.

The first problem we had during our transition year was a decline in teacher morale, caused largely by the radical change in the instructional role of the teacher in the process classroom. Before detailing the ways in which this morale problem manifested itself in our staff, I would like to contrast the role of the writing instructor in a process pedagogy with the role of the traditional composition teacher. In teaching the traditional 500-word theme, the writing instructor is in more-or-less complete control of a class. He or she can dictate a set of rules or directives which all students must follow in producing a theme. The theme, for example, must have a thesis statement toward the end of an introductory paragraph. The first sentences of the body paragraphs are all to do double duty: they must provide transitions and serve as topic sentences. The concluding paragraph must briefly summarize what has gone before and then circle around to provide a variation on the thesis. The end product is thus a neat little exercise, self-contained and concluded. I simplify, I suppose--but not by much. In this kind of writing class, the teachers's job both in and out of the classroom is clearly delineated: since the teacher knows exactly what the theme is to be like in form, he or she can dictate rules--both prescriptive and descriptive--which will bring such a theme about. The teacher, in other words, provides the student with a pre-fab structural frame which the student is to fill in. Allowing, perhaps, for some variation in content, the teacher can easily grade a set of these themes, rewarding those whose papers best follow the form and punishing those whose papers deviate. The final and absolute authority of the teacher is recognized by students and provides a sense of role-security for the teacher. This insistence on formal conformity results in

that teacher's becoming in effect a formal tyrant--however benign--who prescribes a right way for a piece of writing to be. The traditional pedagogy is thus relatively uncomplicated: the role of the instructor is immediately clear to everyone involved.

Teachers using a process approach, however, militate against such formal conformity, recognizing that form is not foreordained or "pre-fab," but evolves instead from the subject, audience, and purpose of the piece of writing. Whereas the traditional teacher aimed at equipping students with the form their writing must take, the process teacher aims at equipping students with what Frank D'Angelo calls "form consciousness," a sense of form appropriate to what the student has to say. No longer a purveyor of codified rules, the process teacher becomes one who suggests, advises, fosters, one who helps a writer in bringing a piece of writing to be. In short, the role of the writing teacher in a process classroom changes dramatically from dictator to facilitator. This means that the process teacher cannot seek refuge in simplistic rules but must adapt instruction and advice for often widely varying needs of his or her students.

Thus, instead of assigning a comparison paper on, say, the advantages of living in an apartment as opposed to the dorm, or vice versa, and then proceeding to describe exactly how that comparison must be written by the students, the process teacher--believing that a writing class is a place for students to write--might provide a class with a whole series of "instigators" which the students are to use as stimuli for journal entries, for free writings, for brainstorming, or for any of a number of other exploratory exercises. After accumulating a number of such pieces of private writings, students are asked to decide which piece might provide them with an issue they would feel comfortable investigating further and eventually going public with. They are asked to prepare one of these

initial writings for presentation to an audience of their peers. An example of an instigator might be a passage from Lewis Thomas on the survival value of making mistakes or a passage from Willa Cather claiming that everyone has stored refuges from the past to retreat to when present problems seem overwhelming. Instead of handing all students in the class a set topic and a set of specifications for the finished product, such a process teacher finds himself or herself helping one student who is writing a refutation of Thomas's assertion, another who is exemplifying Cather's point, a third who admits Cather's assertion but claims that the future too holds imagined refuges similar to those stored from the past, a fourth who is comparing what Freud has to say about human accidents with what Thomas has to say about mistakes, etc. The point is that in such a class, those invariant rules for writing codified in so many handbooks and peddled so assiduously by so many writing teachers do not universally and simplistically apply to the varied writing tasks elected by the students in the class.

Now admittedly, the writing teacher loses a measure of control in such a class because students--no longer passive recipients of precise instructions--must themselves begin to make those decisions which characterize mature writers. The teacher helps them in the decision-making process. With students taking more responsibility for their writing and the form it takes, the writing teacher must obviously abdicate as formal tyrant and settle for the more ambiguous, but more rewarding, position of collaborator and facilitator. It is precisely this necessary abdication, this dramatic redefinition of the role of the writing instructor which brings with it attendant confusions and disorientations. The security of posing as authority in the traditional classroom is difficult for many to relinquish.

Equally difficult for some teachers is the required shift in grading and evaluation of student essays produced in the process classroom. In

the traditional writing program, such evaluation, though tedious and time-consuming, was fairly easy. During solitary weekend grading sessions, the traditional instructor, maintaining the stance of editor/judge, fills the margins of freshmen themes with arcane symbols like "c/s," "awk," and "frag" and notes any deviations from the formula or standard set of organizing rules (thesis, topic sentences, etc., etc.) which all papers are to exemplify.

The process teacher, on the other hand, cannot grade assembly-line fashion, since each paper is different in subject and organization. The papers are more truly communications--which writing should be--and thus have their own ways of being. In short, since the papers are not all alike, they cannot all be graded alike. The process teacher cannot have a set of responses ready prepared to judge 25 papers, all written to a set of specifications foreordained. A human response to a true communication--to what a student has to say, first of all, and then to how he or she has said it--takes more energy, thought, and time than does a more-or-less mechanical response to a piece of writing perceived by all involved as a mere exercise.

During our transition year, then, a number of our teachers had a difficult time with these changes in instructional role and in grading stance. Many, I am happy to say, battled through these difficulties successfully; others, however, were demoralized by the new demands made on them in the process classroom. This demoralization manifested itself in three ways. Some instructors codified the process into a set of rules as rigid as those which underly the "current-traditional" approach. Others simply gave up on process and reverted to the traditional rhetoric of the 500-word theme. Still others adopted an "anything goes" stance.

Those who codified the process did so in order to establish themselves

again as authorities and rule-givers, reducing the mysteries and complexities of the composing process to a series of directives as rigid as those governing the traditional approach. These instructors represented the composing process as linear, segregating invention, drafting, revising into isolated, mutually exclusive stages instead of presenting these components of the process as cyclical and recursive. Under these instructors, students were to progress through a codified set of operations in lockstep order. For example, in each paper the student would be required under penalty of a lower grade to produce a full page of "brainstorming" notes, to compose at least three "existential sentences," to answer a long series of questions given as invention devices in the textbook, to work through the Pentad, to put the subject through a problem-solving frame, to run the issue through the topoi. Little attempt was made to have students explore the discovery procedures they already use or to consider how additional invention procedures could supplement those they come to the course with. No attempt was made to help students to see that invention, instead of being a discrete stage which ends when drafting begins, actually continues to be important throughout the drafting and revising stages. Students were simply expected to do all the invention procedures listed in the textbook and in the order given, and the teacher reviewed them as part of the grading to come. Then the student was expected to produce a rough draft which was to manifest some attempt at revision. This initial draft was to be handed in with the immaculately edited finished product. In short, the instructor would force the composing process into "steps" every bit as rigidly formularized as those codified in the "current-traditional" approach.

Other instructors, often experienced teachers uncomfortable with the new demands made upon them in the process classroom and dissatisfied with the papers produced under their codified versions of the process approach,

simply reverted again--somewhat surreptitiously--to the old rhetoric of the 500-word theme. There they felt in control of the class again; they felt that they could again grade with confidence and, most importantly, that they once again had a "content" to teach. This retreat among these very dedicated teachers was, in short, prompted by a desire for a more "efficient" pedagogy characterized by the direct prescription of topics, structures, and language for their students to use in themes. These were the instructors I would occasionally see in the halls carrying our old textbook along with the new one to their composition classes. I can only imagine what their brighter students thought about the disparities between what their instructors were apparently telling them in lectures and what the author of their textbook was propounding.

Other instructors, often newer teachers prematurely disillusioned with the process approach but convinced that the "current-traditional pedagogy" was flawed, simply receded into what must be termed a permissive stance. Their message to their students was: "Hey, dude, everything's cool here at Mellow State U." Their feeling seemed to be that if there are indeed so many options in the composing process, then almost anything the student chose to write on and almost any form it took was completely acceptable--as long as it was edited correctly. Their assigning of "free" or "anything goes" topics resulted in simplistic narrations, diatribes posing as persuasive papers, informative papers written for no conceivable audience--or papers taken directly from fraternity or sorority files.

In summary, all three types of instructors I have just described found themselves yanked from safe moorings and thrust into a type of teaching which they found unfamiliar and uncomfortable and which they did not feel they could make work. These dedicated teachers were demoralized because they found themselves working at cross-purposes with the departmental syllabus

and official texts. Their demoralization was partly the fault of the administrators of our writing program. We were not able to predict how much preparation the experienced faculty would need, so we focused in this first year on preparing new TAs. As we had no training program for them, we instituted one involving weekly meetings, class observations, and grading sessions. Investing so heavily in this program, we held only two or three general meetings of the experienced staff to discuss such matters as invention strategies, the writing workshop, and grading in the process classroom. The dismaying effect of our relative inattention to general faculty preparation was, as I have already shown, a decline in staff morale. If we had to do it again, we would set up regular meetings for the entire staff so as to coordinate teaching strategies for the process classroom. Inservice retraining is thus crucial for the transition year, as crucial as the careful selection of a usable text and the careful composition of a useful syllabus.

Instructors, however, are not the only casualties when a composition program undergoes radical, but ultimately beneficial change. Students, too, experience a certain amount of disorientation during the transition and after--though their problems apparently stem from the pattern of expectations formed in previous writing classes. Most of our students, for example, come to our process-oriented composition classes with mental sets formed by their previous experiences in high school with the"current-traditional composition pedagogy." They do not find it easy to accept that writing is a messier business than the neat art they have been taught of packing words and sentences into the 500-word theme, that trunk with a lid, three compartments, and a bottom. In short, their expectations of what a writing class should be are often violated in that they are accustomed to being told to write, say, a classification paper--and to

being told what to write it on and how to write it. They feel discomfort at being set "adrift." Not surprisingly. After all, according to Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental theory, most of our students at the freshman level are at a stage in their moral/cognitive growth characterized by conventional thinking, by the maintenance of the social order for its own sake. Hence, many of our students seem bewildered by what they perceive as a radical departure from the expected rules of writing for English teachers. That frequently asked student question--"What do you want?"--becomes almost strident in our process classrooms until the students become acclimated. It is often difficult to convince these students that in a process classroom that question is almost impossible to answer because the teacher has few preconceived notions about the exact specifications for the papers the students are to produce.

Many students also have a difficult time overcoming their well-founded fear of error. Again, understandably. The "current-traditional paradigm" sets up a model; any deviation from the model is judged an "error"--to be avoided at all costs because the grade on the paper bobs up and down according to the number of errors detected. The process approach, however, is predicated on the making of errors, for it is only in trial and error that a student can come to understand the nature of the writing process, to recognize when a piece of writing works or does not, and to revise those weaker parts. In a process-oriented writing class, the student must somehow be brought to see that "error" is the learning writer's real teacher, that a paper is not graven in stone but can and often must be reworked and revised and rewritten before it is ready to present to an audience, that revision involves operations considerably more complex than fiddling with editorial matters and copying over again in ink on every other line.

Though this paper is, in large part, a tale of woe, a long lament,

a painful dissection of problems we encountered during our change from a well-entrenched "current-traditional" composition curriculum to one emphasizing a process approach, I would like to conclude by saying that the majority of our staff feels that our pains were growing pains, that the confusion--though partially avoidable perhaps--was nevertheless worthwhile. Such a simple positive assertion as I make now does not, I know, balance in weight the long confession of problems and disorientations laid before you previously. Most of us feel, however, that through the process approach we have moved our students away from exclusively teacher-centered writing to more authentic communications. With the process approach, we as writing teachers are better able to approximate what should be the goal of all writing instructors--helping students to become virtuoso writers, adept at writing effectively in a number of different situations and under various formal constraints.